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ABSTRACT

When used proactively and comprehensively, assessment can be a powerful tool for evaluating the effectiveness of existing programs and practices and for identifying areas for institutional enhancement. This paper describes using the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) surveys for campus improvement in association with the Input-Environment-Outcome Model (A. Astin), an approach that takes into consideration what happens between the input and the outcomes to determine causality more accurately. The IEO model is particularly useful for assessments because it is designed to control for the nonrandom assignment of people (inputs) to programs (environments). The HERI oversees the administration of four survey instruments that can assist institutions in evaluating the impact of change on their campuses: (1) the CIRP Freshman Survey, completed annually by more than 400,000 college freshmen; (2) Your First College Year Survey, designed to assess the academic and personal development of students over the first year of college; (3) the College Student Survey, administered toward the end of students' undergraduate careers; and (4) the HERI Faculty Survey, administered every 3 years. Examples of the use of these surveys by four institutions are provided. (SLD)

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Implementing A Comprehensive Institutional Assessment Program: Using the CIRP/HERI Surveys for Campus Improvement

HERI

2002

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HERI
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IMPLEMENTING A COMPREHENSIVE INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

USING THE CIRP/HERI SURVEYS FOR CAMPUS IMPROVEMENT

An integrated on-going assessment program permits an institution to make policy decisions based on objective information and evaluate its effectiveness in implementing these decisions.

Assessment is typically viewed by policymakers as a means of making higher education institutions more "accountable." However, when used proactively and comprehensively, assessment can also serve as a powerful tool for evaluating the effectiveness of existing programs and practices and for identifying areas for institutional enhancement. A college or university's capacity for self-assessment can be of key importance not only in maintaining institutional excellence but also in planning, initiating, evaluating, and sustaining change efforts.

Assessment as a Tool for Institutional Change[1]

From a structural standpoint, assessment can help to answer a wide variety of questions regarding institutional practice: How much personal contact do students currently have with faculty? What are the faculty's most-favored pedagogical techniques? How do students spend their time? What are current course-taking patterns? Well-designed assessment programs can act as a springboard for developing new ways to enhance student learning and experience and for engaging members of the campus community in efforts to improve individual and institutional effectiveness.

Beyond structural considerations, successful change efforts also typically entail a substantial shift in the organization's culture, a largely intangible yet undeniably powerful force in shaping the behavior of faculty, student affairs professionals, and administrators. To embrace change, significant numbers of people first need to believe either that their current practices are not effective or that alternatives to those practices will have more favorable effects. Becoming an improvement-oriented institution requires that the campus culture support self-study and that the assessment program is adequate to the task.

Proactive Assessment: Its Role in Facilitating Institutional Change

Assessment can be of considerable value not only in evaluating the impact of any change effort, but also in demonstrating the need for change. Assessment can provide systematic evidence about student learning and development that reveals something about what is working and what can be improved.

Ideally, institutions do not need to develop new assessment practices to facilitate change efforts because the existing culture of the college or the university is such that systematic assessment is already an integral part of daily practice. Most institutions, however, engage in "reactive" assessment, which is done primarily on an ad hoc basis in response either to newly emerging internal needs (such as a proposed change effort) or to external demands (such as accreditation). Without a comprehensive, longitudinal, and proactive program already in place, they are forced to start from scratch each time a need for information arises.

In contrast, proactive assessment anticipates the need for evaluation information and is motivated by recognition of the value of regular feedback. Proactive assessment programs can preclude the need for reactive assessment, and also provide a rich source of information for guiding any change effort and for evaluating its impact.

[1]For more information see Astin, A.W., Lindholm, J.A., Walker, A.A., and Keup, J.R. (2001). Facilitating transformative change through the use of assessment. In *Institutional Transformations: Context and Process* (pp. 59–82). Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

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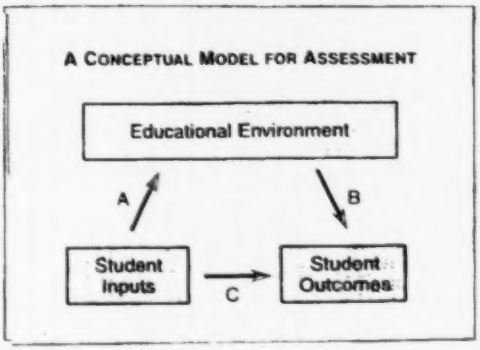

FIGURE 1

Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome (IEO) model offers a framework for analyzing the unique effects of the educational environment on subsequent outcomes.

A Model for Assessing Change

The Input-Environment-Outcome (IEO) model is an approach to looking at cause and effect that takes into consideration what happens between the input and the outcome to more accurately determine causality (see FIGURE 1). It is designed to yield assessment results that will simultaneously (a) yield maximum information on the possible causal connections between various educational practices and educational outcomes and (b) minimize the chances that one's causal inferences will be wrong. Essentially, the IEO design corrects, or adjusts for, input differences in order to get a less biased estimate of the comparative effects of different environments on outcomes.

The IEO model is particularly useful for assessments because it is designed to control for the non-random assignment of people (inputs) to programs (environments). In other words, to control for variables that may influence outcomes. For example, to examine the impact of a new course offering on students, one would need to control for the fact that some students (inputs) will be more inclined to participate in the new course (the environment) than will other students. The outcomes associated with this participation may not reflect the impact of the new course, but may simply represent differences in the characteristics of students who are likely to select it. By controlling for individual characteristics that influence students' decision to participate in the new course, one is better able to estimate the independent effects of participation.[2]

[2]For further discussion on Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome Model see Astin, A.W. (1991). *Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. New York: Macmillan/Oryx.

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) oversees the administration of four survey instruments that can assist institutions in evaluating the impact of change on their campuses. To help institutions follow trends in student and faculty responses, the surveys repeat items from previous years. On each survey, campuses also can add local option items.

The CIRP Freshman Survey

BACKGROUND

Initiated in 1966, the CIRP Freshman Survey is conducted in continued association with the American Council on Education. It is designed to provide institutions with a cost-effective method of collecting comparative data on their entering students.

Annually, more than 400,000 students complete the CIRP survey at 700 colleges and universities nationwide. Data from institutions providing the most representative samples are used to compute the national norms, which are statistically adjusted to represent the nation's total population of first-time, full-time freshmen. Placing institutions in comparison groups based on type, control (public/private) and selectivity level permits comparison of institutions' students with national normative data for students in similar types of institutions.

HOW IT WORKS

Colleges are invited to participate in April of each year. The survey can be administered at any time prior to or during the commencement of Fall instruction, preferably during orientation in a proctored setting. The four-page questionnaire covers a broad array of issues:

- Demographic characteristics
- Expectations of the college experience
- Degree goals and career plans
- Self-confidence
- Attitudes, values, and life goals; and
- Reasons for attending college

Your First College Year Survey (YFCY)

BACKGROUND

Initiated in 2000, Your First College Year (YFCY) represents a collaboration between HERI and the Policy Center on the First Year of College. It is a national survey designed to assess the academic and personal development of students over the first year of college. Its purpose is to identify features of the first year that encourage student learning, involvement, satisfaction, and success, thereby enhancing first-year programs and retention strategies at campuses across the country.

HOW IT WORKS

YFCY registration opens in late Summer and closes in the Fall. The administration period is scheduled for the end of the students' first college year (March–June). Campuses receive their institutional reports and data files in the Summer. The YFCY instrument is available as an on-line instrument or as a paper form, thereby allowing for administration in-class, via campus mail, or by email. Additionally, institutions participating in the CIRP Freshman Survey can use YFCY to follow-up their CIRP survey respondents. The YFCY instrument covers a variety of areas:

- Academic skills and achievement
- Classroom, residential, and employment experiences
- Interactions with peers and faculty
- Satisfaction with curricular and extracurricular experiences
- Self-confidence and feelings of personal success

College Student Survey (CSS)

BACKGROUND

Initiated in 1993, the College Student Survey (CSS) has been used by more than 800 institutions to study their students' academic and life experiences. Designed as a follow-up to the CIRP Freshman Survey, the CSS typically is administered toward the end of students' undergraduate career.

HOW IT WORKS

Colleges are invited to participate in the CSS in the Fall of each year. Institutions determine the method of administration (either in class or as a mail-out survey) and the sample (a subset of all students or a particular cohort), and are responsible for gathering and returning the surveys for processing. Two processing deadlines permit year round administration. Results are available in August; CIRP/CSS "linked" results are available in October. The CSS provides information on a broad range of student outcomes:

- Satisfaction with the college experience
- Involvement
- Cognitive and affective development
- Values, attitudes, and goals
- Degree aspirations and career plans

Used in conjunction, the student surveys (CIRP, YFCY, CSS) provide a valuable tool for comprehensive institutional assessment of students' undergraduate experience (see FIGURE 2). While the surveys can be used independently, a more powerful longitudinal design is enabled when these surveys are linked together.

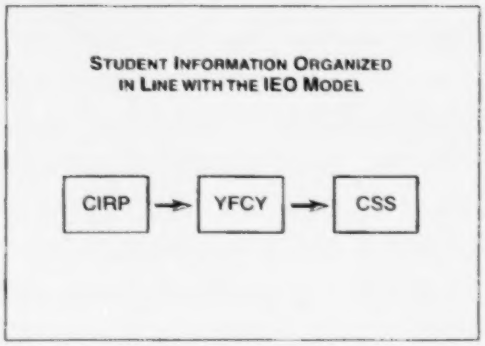

FIGURE 2

The HERI Faculty Survey

BACKGROUND

The Faculty Survey, initiated in 1989, is designed to provide colleges and universities with timely information about faculty workload, teaching practices, job satisfaction, and the academic climate of their institutions.

HOW IT WORKS

Colleges are invited to participate in the survey in July of every third year (next scheduled for 2004–05). Participating institutions can elect to survey all faculty (full-time, part-time, etc.) and administrators, or a sample. To ensure confidentiality, respondents return surveys directly to the processing center. Survey results, including national normative data for faculty in similar institutions, are delivered in the spring of that academic year (see FIGURE 3). The Faculty Survey covers:

- Demographic characteristics
- Values, attitudes, and goals
- Research activities
- Teaching and curricular issues
- Institutional perceptions

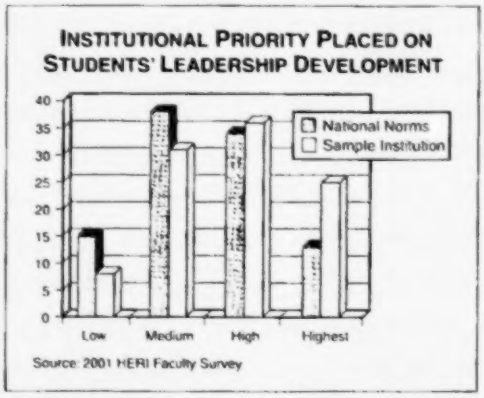

FIGURE 3

Institutions Use Information from the CIRP/HERI Surveys to:

- Engage in self-study and prepare for accreditation activities
- Understand how students adjust to the first year of college
- Evaluate the effects of student involvement
- Understand students' values, attitudes, and goals
- Analyze specific campus issues, policies and programs
- Assess faculty satisfaction with job demands, professional growth and salaries

Here are some examples of how institutions have used the CIRP/HERI Surveys:

Eckerd College has created an integrated assessment system by using all four HERI surveys. By tracking the same cohort of students across their college experience, we are able to analyze how students change and grow as a direct result of attending the college—above and beyond normal maturation. We can also use the data to identify experiences that have a positive impact on students—which tells us what we are doing effectively. At the same time, we can discern institutional practices that have negative effects, thus allowing us to make adjustments that enhance students' experiences. Recently, Eckerd has used CIRP/HERI data to evaluate our Student Affairs programming, determine the impact of our General Education program, and examine the effects of faculty mentoring on our students' retention and graduation rates, grades, graduate school attendance, and community service involvement. Comparative information about faculty work activities, values, experiences, and perceptions of institutional practice provides us with crucial data to share with our faculty. Their feedback also helps inform programming that promotes their professional development.

Northern Illinois University has used the CIRP student surveys to assess student characteristics, college experiences, student growth, and achievement outcomes. Freshman Survey results suggested that students' self-ratings of their academic abilities and expectations for their academic success were significant predictors of grade performance in several first-year courses, including mathematics, science, English, and psychology. The same self-ratings have also been significantly related to undergraduate persistence. We have also used YFCY and CSS results in conjunction with Freshman Survey data to assess instructional practices and out-of-class experiences at the university and to examine student growth and development.

The University of Notre Dame participates regularly in the CIRP and CSS surveys. The Institutional Profiles from both surveys are shared with campus administrators annually. In recent years, we have accompanied the profile with a narrative highlighting significant changes or findings. By far the most valuable use of CIRP survey data, however, has been replication of the study "What Matters in College" (Astin, 1993). By applying the I-E-O model to our own data, we have been able to examine thousands of relationships. It is considerable work to match the data across student cohorts, but well worth it for the rich and multi-faceted insights it yields into the nature of the undergraduate experience.

At Miami University of Ohio, we have just completed a thirty-year trend analysis of the CIRP for distribution across the university looking at how our freshmen have changed over the years. Recently, we have used the CSS to study the development of student leadership on the Miami campus. In addition, we have used CSS and CIRP results for in-depth analysis of our greek life. Finally, we use the CSS in conjunction with the HERI Faculty Survey to study classroom practices and to compare the pedagogical perceptions of our seniors and our faculty.

For further information about the Input-Environment-Outcome (IEO) Model or the CIRP/HERI surveys, contact:

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